

The new American paradigm: a modest critique

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XVII. Sektion Religionssoziologie

Leitung: Wolfgang Jagodzinski, Monika Wohlrab-Sahr und Georg Kamphausen

The Manifold Faces of Religion in Modern Societies: The Case of Germany and the USA

1. The New American Paradigm: A Modest Critique

Andrew Greeley

Introduction

»The Sociology of American Religion is undergoing a period of ferment ... a paradigm shift in process.« Thus does R. Stephen Warner (1993) begin a long and seminal article in the *American Journal of Sociology*. Scarcely three years after the article, Warner's prediction has been spectacularly fulfilled. A group of scholars, many of them young, some of them on the faculties of Catholic universities (though not themselves Catholic), have swept all before them, reduced to ashes Peter Berger's (1967) *Sacred Canopy*, dismissed Bryan Wilson's (1966) claim that high levels of religious practice in the United States are proof of secularization as senseless ideology, challenged European theories of secularization, refuted attacks on their own methodology, and transferred their industrious work within their New Paradigm from field journals to the prestigious major journals.

The most fundamental insight of the New Paradigm is that, Berger's »plausibility structure« to the contrary notwithstanding, pluralism is good for religion because it forces competition in an open market place of belief systems. Those working in the New Paradigm embrace economic or quasi economic models and speak of »supply side« religion, religion as »human capital,« religion as »rational choice.« They are not only resourceful theorists but resourceful hunters of data and sophisticated analysts. One can no longer work in the sociology of religion in the United States and indeed in the English speaking world and ignore their New Paradigm. There is little reason to expect that the New Paradigm will have an impact on the conviction of most American sociologists that religion is not sociologically important any more – dogmas rarely yield to evidence. Nonetheless they have at least forced those sociologists who read the major journals to be exposed to the possibility that they might be wrong.

There are at least four reasons for the emergence of this New Paradigm:

1. The increasing popularity of economic or »rational choice« models in American sociology has created a climate in which it seems perfectly natural to apply such models to the study of religion.
2. The availability of data sets both the past have provided raw materials for detailed analysis as a substitute for pontification about the impact of the various »-izations« on religion.

Thus they practitioners of the new paradigm have established that in the United States »urbanization« leads to higher rather than lower levels of religious practice. Finke and Stark (1988) and Christiano (1987). The city is more sacred than the country.

3. The availability of survey data sets with time series responses have demolished predictions of a decline in religion. Most notable among the data sets is the General Social Survey which will celebrate its 25th anniversary next year. However, other sources including the World Value Study and the International Social Survey program have also been useful to those working in the New Paradigm because they seem to demand a different analytic approach. Indeed, as we shall see, some of those working in the New Paradigm have used the Values Study to argue against a decline in religion in Europe. They have exposed the poverty of imagination and insight of the analysis which the official interpreters of the Value Study have presented. (Ester, Halman, de Moor 1993. For a contrary approach see Whelan et al 1994).
4. Finally, the old paradigm failed the ultimate test to which a theory must be submitted: the hypotheses it generated simply did not fit the data. In a data driven sociology such a result creates a demand for new theory. Perhaps what is surprising is not that they theory finally emerged in the early nineties, but that it did not emerge at least ten years earlier.

The old paradigm, however, is a theory in a different and more comprehensive sense. It purports to know what religion is and to have accounted for its decline. The fact of that decline is taken for granted and rarely if ever substantiated save anecdotally. This decline is taken to be the result of inevitable historical processes (modernization, urbanization, rationalization etc. etc.). Secularization is not a heuristic model but an accurate (and true) description of a reality which everyone knows to be true. Many of the attacks on the New Paradigm ignore its limited intent, assume that it purports to be as comprehensive as the old paradigm, and talk right past it.

For those unfamiliar with »supply side« economics, the notion can best be illustrated by the following example. Twenty years ago there was little demand for personal computers. The demand was created because a large supply of such computers at reasonable prices more or less suddenly became available. Instead of demand generating supply, supply generated demand.

When they apply this model to religion, the »supply siders« (Most notably Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, Lawrence Iannaccone and their associates) suggest that the demand for religion (perceived and unperceived) is fairly constant and that variations in religious behavior must be attributed to the increase supply of religious institutions and functionaries working in an unregulated market place.

Finke, Guest, and Stark in a recent article (1996) summarize the theory: For a challenging synopsis of the Paradigm one might well turn to an aggressive article by Stark and Iannaccone (1994) in which they dismiss the »secularization« theory as it applies to Europe. They list seven propositions which encompass the principle assumptions of the New Paradigm:

1. The capacity of a single religious firm to monopolize a religious economy depends upon the degree to which the state uses coercive force to regulate the religious economy.
2. To the degree that a religious economy is unregulated, it will tend to a very pluralistic.

3. To the degree that a religious economy is pluralistic, firms will specialize.
4. To the degree that a religious economy is competitive and pluralistic overall levels of religious participation will tend to be high. Conversely to the degree that a religious economy is monopolized by one or more state-supported firms, overall levels of participation will tend to be low.
5. To the degree that a religious firm achieves a monopoly, it will seek to exert its influence over other institutions and thus the society will be sacralized.
6. To the degree that deregulation occurs in a previously highly regulated society, the society will be desacralized.
7. The relationship between the degree of regulation of the religious economy and start-up costs for a new religious organization is curvilinear – declining as the state exerts less coercion on behalf of a monopoly firm but rising again as fully developed pluralism produces a crowded marketplace of success and effective firms.

The notion that a state established church (or two state established churches as in Germany) represents a »coercive« regulation of the religious economy may seem odd at first. It is certainly the case, however, as the supply-siders repeat over and over again, that established churches are notoriously unsuccessful, that in fact they are not only monopolies but lazy monopolies.

If the two authors are correct, then it would follow that deregulation of the religious market place (disestablishment) and religious mobilization by shrewd religious entrepreneurs would create a religious »revival« in these countries. If the clergy in these countries, they imply, were not salaried government bureaucrats but had to be responsive to their people in order to survive, religious mobilization might well follow. One could remark that the Federal Republic could be an ideal natural experiment for such a theory. If the state abandoned its policy of financial support for religious institutions and the clergy (and hierarchy) had to provide for themselves, would there be a religious »revival?« Would an increase in the religious supply as the church and the clergy competed for support lead to an apparent increase in religious demand.

Minimally, one must concede to these authors, that a religious monopoly, especially when it becomes a lazy monopoly, is not in the long run an asset to institutional religion. Patently the New Paradigm poses a challenge to European sociologists of religion and indeed to all sociologists in Europe and North America. Like most new paradigms, the challenge is so astonishing and so contentious that it is easy to simply ignore it. If one of the measures of a successful paradigm is its capacity to provide an environment in which further research becomes possible on issues which have not been addressed before or have been addressed only peripherally, then the New Paradigm is already successful. It is unlikely that Sherkat would have asked the questions he so resourcefully addresses unless the New Paradigm had provided a perspective within which he might work. Under the old paradigm there was not much point in wondering why someone chose, for example, to marry within his own heritage and someone chose to marry across denominational lines. Such an issue did not matter. Mixed marriages were merely one more indicator of »secularization.« If religion was in a condition of irreversible decline, was that not a sufficient reason for

ignoring religious boundaries at the time of marriage. That most people continued to marry their own kind was simply evidence of culture lag.

Perhaps the most important merit of the New Paradigm is that it takes religion seriously which the old paradigm never really did. If a phenomenon is about to disappear, there is no real need to do much more than record its disappearance. The New Paradigm makers looked around and saw that many people were in fact still religious, especially in that country where the secularization theory said religion should have been most in retreat (and about which Bryan Wilson said its high levels of devotion proved how secular the society was!). They therefore chose to bracket the question of religious decline and study religious behavior as it existed. By so doing they have turned away from what was an intellectual dead end and have launched a vigorous and creative ferment in the sociology of religion. The link between what Finke calls religious regulation and low levels of religious practice is so obvious one has to wonder why it has taken so long for someone to build a theory out of it.

Even those who are so angry at them that they can hardly conceal their anger, have been forced to confront the New Paradigmists on their own terms. They have, I believe, changed American sociology of religion permanently. As I have said before they are not likely to change the attitude of most American sociologists towards religion or towards the sociology of religion. If the angel Gabriel appeared at high noon in front of William James Hall at Harvard – or, for that matter, if William James himself should appear – and announced that religion did matter, it would have no impact on American sociology.

Indeed if that worthy angel should enter the hallowed precincts of the National Opinion Research Center with the same announcement, pertinent religious questions would not appear on NORC's questionnaires.

Whether the New Paradigm will be taken seriously by European sociologists remains to be seen. Candidly, I wouldn't bet on it.

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2. Religion and Modernization in Comparative Perspective – David Martin's Theory of Secularization reconsidered

Willfried Spohn

David Martin's general theory of secularization is the most elaborated historical-sociological theory of the varying processes of secularization in the European Christian civilization. However, Martin's theory has been rarely taken up in systematic ways—if so, as a directly testable theory of present degrees of secularization in Europe, rather than in its theoretical bases and historical comparative scope.

I myself have come across Martin's theory in my historical-sociological research on religion, nation-building and class formation in 19th and 20th centuries Germany in an Euro-